

DG INSIGHTS

DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE INSIGHTS

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About DG Insights

DG Insights, an online publication for the Democratic Governance Community of Practice, seeks to highlight emerging trends and substantive issues UNDP/UN practitioners and the larger research community are grappling with and to promote deeper understanding on democracy and democratic governance. We are inviting network members with pertinent experiences and/or thematic expertise on specific topics to contribute to **DG Insights** at dgp-net@groups.undp.org

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Women in Politics: Overcoming Barriers to Participation

"Gender equality in the political arena has a widely recognized moral dimension: it is socially just for women to participate in decisions that affect them. A democracy where half the population cannot participate contradicts current understanding of the term."

Broad-based participation in politics also has a clear practical dimension—and a development rationale. It supports efficiency—more sources of information make political decision-making more informed and responsive to diverse realities on the ground. Women, as a group, have different experiences than men. While some men may support women's issues in the halls of power, a more typical pattern is that without women expressing their own perspectives, they mostly go unnoticed.

Women's political participation feeds into social stability and harmony, a basic to sustainable development. When most people feel they have a voice and a stake in development, and know they may reap some benefit from it, they are far more likely to invest their lives in achieving it.

What are the barriers to women's political participation?

Gender norms: Leadership is still considered a mostly male skill and prerogative across Asia-Pacific. And women, due to patterns of gender discrimination, have less access to education, healthcare, wealth, mobility and all the other forms of social capital that allow them to stake a claim in the wider world. Ideas about leadership are set in the home, where men are commonly considered the head of household, and then reinforced in the world, where men dominate positions of power.

Triple burden of women: Political systems have been slow to recognize that women have extra responsibilities for household work and care of children. These do not fit easily with the demands of public service. But rarely have even basic forms of support been offered, such as child-care facilities in parliamentary or party offices.

In a discussion by the International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics, practitioners themselves said that, "the issue of the family and triple work load is real. This often forces women to put more effort into "doing politics", dedicating themselves to politics when their children are older and more independent. This is a great weakness, because it keeps young people, both men and women ... from moving at the same pace."

Lack of money: Increasing costs of elections make campaign finance a big issue for both women and men. However, most women in politics agreed that they face more problems raising large amounts of money for their campaigns, and can rarely compete with their male counterparts. Public and party money are not equally distributed because often men are in charge of the funds. Another observation is that "many women who have been successful in politics in the region are well to do, or shielded by family ties and dynastic politics."

Political party structures and exclusion from informal political networks: Parties are gatekeepers of elections in democratic societies. Inclusion of women into party candidate lists is one of the important steps in increasing women's political participation. Barriers that women face in being members of and getting nominated by political parties are lack of: money; networks supporting women candidates and leaders; political will to promote women; confidence among women to compete with male counterparts; and long term strategies e.g. women as not seen as key constituents.

Overcoming Barriers: Possible Options

Role of quotas: Getting political parties and men in those parties to institute quotas, both voluntary and mandatory, is an important step in working with men to promote women in politics. Male champions play a key role in convincing other men in political parties, on the importance of quotas in enabling women's entry in politics. However, quotas do not solve all the problems. Efforts need to continue in identifying comprehensive strategies to promote women in public life.

Only a third of Asia-Pacific countries have some kind of gender quota in place for political participation. In countries without quotas, women's participation rate in elected offices is around 14 percent, rising to 20.4 percent in countries that have them. While the region is far short of a percentage even approximately reflecting the number of women in the population, and lags behind most other regions on women's participation in politics, quotas seem to be making some difference.

Quotas can target the pool of aspirants for political office, nominated candidates, or a number of reserved seats, either elected or appointed. Globally, more countries are choosing to reserve seats—a trend that is evident in South Asia as well—and a growing number of women are being elected to them. Seat reservations have the advantage of ensuring that women actually end up in political office. Compliance is easier to measure, particularly in countries that have a lot of political parties and/or a low level of party transparency.

Experiences with party quotas show that unless parties make a deliberate effort to put women in electable positions: they may run for office but never arrive there. In proportional systems, for example, they may be clustered exclusively at the bottom of the party list, with little chance of securing a seat. In majoritarian systems, they can be sent off to contest unwinnable seats.

Build networks and maintain them even after being elected: Networks will not only help women win an election, but also to get re-elected, and to provide access to newcomers. Women's parliamentary caucuses and women's sections of political parties are one of the most important networks that women parliamentarians can rely on to push their policy agendas and build coalitions.

Fulfill women's promise: means equipping women who are new to politics to understand the political process, and make it work for themselves and their constituents. This helps improve the quality of governance and minimize complaints about the competency of "quota candidates." Other steps are skills training to women that respond to their needs, such as public speaking, self confidence and working with media. Michael Rowland, Director, National Democratic Institute also suggests that, "actively involve the men ... Many do not understand the scope of the issue and proposals. The more men learn about gender, the more likely they are to be receptive to the demands of their female colleagues."

Electoral systems determine who gets into office and how. Research suggests that in democracies, proportional representation systems help more women enter parliament. The vast majority of the top 20 countries in the world in terms of women's presence in the legislature use proportional representation. The average level of women's representation is appreciably higher in countries with these systems than in countries with plurality/majoritarian systems.

One explanation is that women have a greater probability of being included on a party ticket, particularly in larger districts with more than one representative. People can hedge their bets, especially if supporting a woman candidate feels like a new and risky experiment. In plurality/majoritarian systems, a woman candidate usually has to compete one-on-one with a cross-section of male candidates, only one of whom will emerge the winner.

In Asia-Pacific, there are 15 countries in the top half of 187 countries ranked by the percentage of women in a lower or single-house legislature. Eight have proportional or mixed electoral systems; seven have plurality/majoritarian systems. Nine countries have some form of quota in place. Those countries that seem to do well without quotas—aside from New Zealand, which is number one in the region—tend to be clustered in South-east Asia. Lao People's Democratic Republic, Singapore and Viet Nam have participation rates around 25 percent under plurality/majoritarian systems.

Campaign financing: Parties can make more funds available to women, but electoral systems can also have a role in adjudicating how money can be raised and spent. Public financing and campaign contribution limits can help make access to funds more democratic, for women and men, as can requirements for detailed reports on campaign spending. Controls on campaign financing can also cut patron-client relationships where elected politicians end up dishing out favours, typically at public expense, for large donors.

Conclusion

Women's political participation is not only a "women's issue" but a matter of democratic rights. Barriers to having more women in politics, with the ability to influence required transformations need to be overcome, from the basic imbalances between men and women regarding family obligations to the more complex power relationships in political cultures and structures. There are benefits to instituting quotas as one of the mechanisms through which men and women can work together to change the political system. Quotas also encourage women to run for political office both at national and local levels of government.

But quotas are only the first step. A lot of work still needs to be done in going beyond tokenism.

If "politics is the art of the possible", then women and men can both be artists in sketching the rules of the game.

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